

From the *Times-Dispatch*, February 17, 1907.

**PRESIDENCY OF THE CONFEDERACY OFFERED
STEPHENS AND REFUSED.**

*So. Hist. Society Papers
Vol 36*

Colonel David Twiggs Hamilton, of Georgia, tells this story of why Alexander H. Stephens was not elected President of the Southern Confederacy:

"The subject was broached to Mr. Stephens on the way to Montgomery," says Colonel Hamilton. "Mr. Toombs took the train with us at Crawfordville, and we found Mr. Chestnut, of South Carolina, aboard. He came over and took the seat in front of Mr. Stephens and me. Mr. Toombs was in the seat behind.

"‘Mr. Stephens,’ said Chestnut, ‘the delegation from my State has been conferring and has decided to look to Georgia for a President.’

"‘Well, sir,’ Mr. Stephens replied, ‘we have Mr. Toombs, Mr. Cobb, Governor Jenkins and Governor Johnson. Either will suit; I will give my vote to either.’

"‘We are only looking to you and Mr. Toombs, Mr. Stephens,’ Chestnut answered positively. ‘No other names were mentioned, and the majority of the delegation favors you.’

"‘No, that can never be, that can never be,’ Mr. Stephens replied excitedly. And I thought his face turned a little pale.

"‘What is it, Alec?’ Toombs asked, leaning over the back of our seat.

"‘Come over here,’ Stephens told him.

OPPOSED TO SECESSION.

"I started to get up to give Toombs my seat, but Mr. Stephens put a hand on my knee, and Mr. Toombs took the place beside Mr. Chestnut, who repeated the proposition, very candidly saying that a majority of the South Carolina delegation favored Mr. Stephens.

"‘That settles it, Alec,’ said Toombs. ‘You are the choice of

the Georgia delegation; we have talked it over, so you must let us present your name to the convention.'

"'No,' repeated Mr. Stephens. 'No, I have not been in this movement. I was opposed to secession. I cannot take any office under the government. It would not be judicious; it would not be good policy to put me forward for any position.'

"'Alec—' Mr. Toombs began; but Mr. Stephens would not let him speak, so he laughed and changed the subject.

"That was the last of it on the train, but we hadn't been an hour in Montgomery when Willy P. Harris and Colonel A. M. Cambe called. Harris was the first spokesman, and he went straight to the point.

"'The Mississippi delegation prefer you for President, Mr. Stephens,' said he. 'And we have come to ask if you will allow us to present your name.'

"'Gentlemen, I cannot be a candidate for the Presidency of the Southern Confederacy,' he replied. 'I was opposed to secession. You must eliminate my name as a candidate for all offices under the government. It would be bad policy for you to present my name.'

"Campbell bent forward, listening to Stephens earnestly. The instant the last words fell from his tongue he spoke.

"'You are mistaken, sir!' he cried. 'It would be good policy. The very best policy, sir. You opposed secession. You had good reasons—weighty reasons, sir. The whole country—North and South—the whole world, knows your reasons. You are the only man to whom the Unionists will give their cordial support. You are the only man who can take away from this movement the character of a rebellion.'

ARGUES THE POINT.

"Mr. Stephens had by this time recovered from his irritation, and appeared more willing to argue the point.

"'I think you do the Unionists injustice, Colonel Campbell,' he replied. 'While they earnestly opposed the movement, when the ordinance of secession was passed they bowed to the will of the majority and have all expressed their determination to sustain and defend their State.'

"'You understand, of course, that I speak only of the party in my own State. I am told that the Union feeling was not so strong in Mississippi. Conditions are doubtless different with you.'

"'No, about the same; about the same,' Colonel Campbell rejoined. The Union feeling is just as strong, though their votes are not so numerous as they were when they elected Henry S. Foote and defeated Jeff Davis for Governor.

"'They acted in Mississippi just about as they did in Georgia. They declared their willingness to sustain and defend; but for success in this movement we must have more than their willingness; we must have their enthusiasm.

"'We need and must have the enthusiastic support of the Unionists of the Southern States. It is our best policy, Mr. Stephens, and you are the best man for furthering that policy, sir.'

"After arguing for about two hours they got him to the point of saying he would consider, then very wisely withdrew.

THE OFFER REPEATED.

"The next day Judge Chilton and Colin McRea, of the Alabama delegation, called for the same purpose. Their shadows had hardly left Stephens' door, when Keitt, of South Carolina, and Mr. Toombs made their appearance—at least Toombs didn't make his appearance. He sat out in the passageway, and when I let Keitt in Toombs put his finger to his lips and shook his head.

"Well, Keitt talked and talked and talked. I never knew a man who could beat Keitt talking.

"'You are the preference of the South Carolina delegation for President, Mr. Stephens, and I am sent to ask if you will serve if elected?' was what it all amounted to.

"Mr. Stephens listened thoughtfully to all he had to say. When Keitt stopped, waiting for his reply, there was a moment's silence. I don't believe I ever was more anxious in my life. I knew what Mr. Stephens' inclination was, and I had heard his prayer the night after the secession of Georgia.

"'If I am the unanimous choice of the delegates, as well as the States, and can organize a cabinet with such concert of

ideas and ability as will justify the hope of success, I will take it,' said he, 'But on no other conditions.'

"Mr. Keitt left satisfied, and Mr. Toombs was jubilant. When I returned to the room Mr. Stephens was smoking.

"At the time Montgomery was full to overflowing. Besides the accredited delegates from the six seceding States, there were many politicians and delegates—unofficial, of course—from Virginia, from Maryland, from North Carolina, Texas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri and Arkansas.

"All represented the radical secessionists of their States, and all were rabid for war. We knew what work had to be done, but Mr. Stephens never opened his lips. Never once was the matter mentioned between us.

"On the evening of February 8th, after the adoption of the Constitution, a motion was made to go into the election of the chief officers. Somebody, I forget who, moved that the election should take place the next day at 12 o'clock, and in the meantime the delegations should consult separately. That was decided on and the meeting adjourned.

"We had hardly reached our hotel when in walked Toombs and Keitt, followed by Judge Chilton, Willy Harris, General Sparrow and Henry Marshall, of Louisiana; Morton and Owen, of Florida, and the whole Georgia delegation. Toombs was the spokesman, and I never saw him in a better humor or looking handsomer.

"'Alec,' said he, 'you are the choice of every man in Congress, and all of us are ready to pledge ourselves to help you form your cabinet. There is only one point—those fellows from Virginia and the border States want you to promise to strike the first blow.'

"For a moment there was perfect silence. I believe every man in the room held his breath. Mr. Stephens made no reply and Mr. Toombs went on.

"'Those fellows say their States are hanging in the balance, ready to turn with the first blow. They know Buchanan will never dare to strike us; they believe Lincoln will be as cowardly.

"'Now they want the question settled in their States, and they want you to promise when the first opportunity offers, say if

the Administration should attempt to reinforce or provision Sumter, you will strike the first blow.'

"For about two heartbeats they faced, that magnificent specimen of manhood and that fragile, emaciated little man.

WOULD NOT STRIKE THE FIRST BLOW.

"'No, I will never never strike the first blow at the Union,' said Mr. Stephens, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"'Alec!' cried Mr. Toombs.

"They gazed into each other's eyes. Then, without a word, Toombs turned and walked out of the room, with the other delegates at his heels.

"I afterward understood that many of the delegations sat up all night caucusing; that Toombs was the second choice with the members of Congress, but the delegates from the undecided States did not consider him radical enough.

"They said he would make Mr. Stephens his premier, and be guided by his advice. Cobb and Rhett's names were both considered, but the radicals would not accept either. After further skirmishing Jeff Davis' name was presented, and the radicals made no objections.

"For the sake of harmony, the other delegates fell into line, and the next morning, February 9, 1861, the Hon. Jefferson Davis was unanimously elected President of the Confederate States of America."

